THE MERRY-GO-ROUND

I

A WHITE MAN CAME FROM NOBODY KNEW WHERE WITH A merry-go-round and set it up in the vacant lot across from the village depot. Every evening when work on the plantations was over the gay music sounded clear in the still air, and the darkies flocked down to the village and rode out all the money they had. Then they stayed on a while to listen to the merry tunes.

Flaming gasoline torches lighted the tent, and fiery looking bay and black and gray horses rocked and challenged riders to come try them; and gilded chariots shone bright.

The man's name was Carson. He was white, for his skin was fair, but no such white man had ever been in these parts before. Except for his white skin he seemed black as any of the folks that rode on the merry-go-round.

Maum Mary Parker cooked his meals and took them to his tent. He offered to go to her house to eat, but she refused to allow this.

"No, I rudder fetch yo' victuals here to yo'," she said.

He offered to pay her well if she'd let him sleep in the soft looking, quilt-covered bed that he could see through the open window.

"No," she said. "No white man ain' nebber yet sleep in no bed o' mine, an' I know I ain't gwine sta't wid you."

He laughed and spat on the ground.

"All right, Aunty, but my money's good as anybody's. I'm sure it's as good as any these white folks round here's got, if they've got any."

"You eat yo' dinner; I'm waitin' on dem t'ings, an' keep yo' mout' off my white folks."

He laughed again.

"Some folks, eh?"

II

Jesse Weeks worked at the oil mill for good wages. He was strong as a mule and muscled like an ox. He was well fed, for Maum Mary fed him, and besides her good meals he often carried sweet potatoes to the mill and dipped them in the smoking hot oil that dripped from the press. Nothing in the world was better, except sometimes ash cake dipped in that same hot oil for gravy.

Jesse worked at the press ten hours a day, then went home to Maum Mary's, washed up, dressed, and was ready to take Meta, Maum Mary's daughter, to a dance or a party. Now they rode on the merry-go-round every night. One night they'd choose a chariot; another night white horses side by side. Meta sat modestly sidewise as she had seen white ladies sit on real horses. Another night they'd ride bay horses, or black.

They'd be married Thanksgiving with a big wedding. Maum Mary was already saving up eggs for the cakes. For 'twas something in these days to raise a girl and marry her off without anybody's ever having said anything against her.

The first time Carson smiled at Meta she was confused. She dropped a curtsey in return and said respectfully,

"Good evenin', sir."

He laughed, looking at her with bold, appraising eyes.

The next night when Jesse left Meta and went over to the parcher to buy a sack of peanuts, Carson walked over by her and said with a smile,

"You look like you're scared to speak to me. What's the matter with you? Is he got you under the hack?" indicating Jesse, who was returning.

"No, sir," answered Meta in an embarrassed way. She was not altogether certain of his words, for his r's rolled strangely.

Next morning Meta went to the village store, and Carson was lounging on the counter inside.

"Won't you have a dope?" he asked her.[1]

The clerk glanced up at him quickly, but Meta appeared not to hear, and nothing more was said.

When the girl stepped out of the door, Carson got down off the counter and stood in the door and watched her cross the railroad track, then on the path up the hill.

Maum Mary was late getting the clothes in off the line that evening. The washing was a big one.

"Meta, you run on an' take da' white man's supper to him. I ain' likes to sen' yo', but jus' leab de dishes wid him till in de mornin', an' hurry on back."

Carson took the pan from the girl and untied the white cloth that covered it. Chicken, biscuits, hominy, gravy.

"Your ma is some cook, girl. I'll get fat staying here. But what makes you treat me so cold?"

Meta turned away and started home.

"Ma say she'll git de dishes in de mornin'."

"Hold on, what's your hurry? I've got a book of tickets here for you to ride out. Wait a minute, let me get 'em for you."

But Meta was gone.

III

Jesse cut a step or two to the jazzy music, then asked Meta gaily, a little later,

"What'll we ride tonight?"

"Le's ride one o' them gol' chariots. I declare tha's de sweetes' ridin' I ever ride," declared Meta in her gentle voice.

[1] Until the 1930's in South Carolina and in much of the rest of the South, a Coca-Cola ® was called "a dope."

When the ride was over and a pair of horses had been tried to see which was really the better, Jesse went to the parcher for peanuts. Carson saw him go and came at once to where Meta stood waiting.

"What made you run off so? Whyn't you wait and get the tickets? You must think I want to eat you or something. Why, a girl like you!"

He didn't finish his sentence, for Jesse landed a terrific blow on his jaw, and followed it quickly with another.

A crowd gathered around them uncertain what to do. "You all lef' Jesse 'lone, he knows what he'd do. Dat ain' no white gentleman." One of the older men watched the fight with interest until Carson was soundly beaten, then he took Jesse's arm in a firm grip.

"You done gi' him enough, Jesse. Quit now."

Meta's voice was full of excitement as they walked home up the hill.

"I'm sho glad you done it, Jesse, but I was dat scared!"

But Maum Mary shook her head in disapproval.

"You better mine, boy. It don' do to trifle wid strange white men."

Next morning, before day, somebody knocked on the door of the shed-room where Jesse slept. He jumped up quickly, for the gasoline torches had made him dream of fire. Maybe the oil mill was afire!

He opened the door, saying excitedly,

"What you want?"

Carson's pistol gleamed in the starlight.

"Gawd!" said Jesse as it flashed and he fell, shot through, in the doorway.

The stillness was rent with the shrieks of Meta and Maum Mary. The news spread like wild-fire—Carson had shot Jesse. By dawn, hundreds of negroes filled the village street. Men and women were armed with hoes and rakes, axes and guns. Where was Carson? He was not in the tent where he slept.

The clerk in the village store had already dressed and gone

downstairs, from the room where he slept, to the telephone. When he got Central, he said,

"Will you please telephone all the gentlemen around here and tell them that this merry-go-round fellow down here has shot Jesse Weeks? The niggers are pretty well stirred up, and they'd all better come help me get him off on the eight o'clock train."

By sunrise one of the plantation owners on horseback, with a gun on his shoulder, came riding down the hill into the village.

"What are all you niggers doin' here this time o' day?" he asked as he rode through the crowd.

"Good mornin', Cap'n," they answered politely and touched their hats.

"You'd better go on home, all of you. If Sheriff Hill has to come up here this mornin' there'll be trouble for somebody."

There were indistinct mutterings as he hitched his horse to a tree in front of the store and went upstairs to the clerk's room. Soon three more gentlemen rode up, hitched their horses and went upstairs, then two more. At last, nine horses were hitched outside.

Maum Hannah cooked for the clerk upstairs and lived in a cabin back of the store. She came out of her door with a great pot of steaming coffee that left a trail of fragrance behind it.

"One o' you niggers come open dis door fo' me," she commanded.

When it was done she went up the stairs talking to herself.

The eight o'clock train blew at the river bridge three miles away. There was a hush. Then steps sounded on the stairway, slow ready steps. Ten men came down—no, eleven. In the hollow square they formed at the door was a man with his hat pulled down over his eyes. Another man joined them, the village policeman. He was black, but he upheld the law whenever it was possible.

They walked slowly across the street to the depot, as with the dead, and reached it just as the train stopped. Two men stepped

aboard; then Carson; then two more. The train started and the four men got off the rear end of it.

"Looks like you-all are having a picnic out here," said the conductor to the others who were standing outside.

"No, nothing like that," one of them answered.

The white men mounted their horses and rode up the hill toward home. The black people stood around talking in low tones. One of them came over to the policeman and talked a minute, and the policeman walked on down the street in another direction. Soon there was a shout and the tent over the merry-go-round was in flames. Horses and chariots stood still and burned to charred wood, they that had been so gay and swift!

IV

Carson left the train at the first large station it reached. He went to the station lunch counter, got a sandwich and a cup of coffee, then went across the street where he saw a sign "Board and Lodging." He took a room and went to bed.

When he awoke, the day was almost over. A new moon showed clear through the window. He stretched his limbs, yawned, then got up and washed his face in the china basin. He looked in the glass at his bruised cheek, smoothed his hair with his hands, put on his coat and went downstairs to the sidewalk.

With his hands in his pockets, he looked around. A cotton mill was over on the hill beyond the depot. Not far from it was a large tent. It was no merry-go-round tent. He'd go take a look at it.

He walked through its open door and a red-faced, stockily built man with a black moustache greeted him.

"Well, brother, how do you do?"

Carson's quick eyes took in the Bible on the table, the organ on one side, the hymn books.

"I'm down and out," he answered gloomily. "I thought I'd come talk to you."

"That's right, that's right. Cast your burden on the Lord, brother, it's the only way to salvation."

"But I'm out of a job," said Carson.

"Well, according to John 6:27, 'Labor not for the meat that perisheth.' What's your business, brother?"

Carson hesitated.

"I wish I could get work here with you. I'm mighty handy with a tent. You ought to see me take one down and put it up."

"You know anything about music?"

"I know it from A to Z," Carson answered confidently.

"I've been thinking about getting a regular fellow to go around and help me, but collections haven't been much lately."

"I tell you," said Carson. "You try me. I'll work for my board till you see if I give satisfaction. You won't be out anything much that way."

"How about them gas lights; can you light them?"

"Just watch me."

That night Carson rose from the congregation and gave a remarkable testimony of his salvation from sin. Next morning he practised faithfully on the organ until he could play a number of the hymns to be sung during the services.

"That's right, you got to put pep in 'em," approved the preacher.

Carson soon developed into a fine exhorter, and followed the sermons with a moving appeal to sinners to turn from sin. It was a steadier business than his former one; more exciting, too.

Jesse did not die. He's only crippled. He has crutches, and drags both feet together when he walks. He makes baskets and fish traps and chair bottoms out of split hickory.

Meta and Maum Mary take in washing still, and all together they make a living. Maum Mary is careful to take a part of their earnings to pay the preacher.

"Preachers is de servants ob Gawd, Meta, we 'bliged to take care of 'em or de world 'ud git too full o' sin."